

A Test Case for Education

Any progress in the Asia-Pacific region towards education for all will inevitably have a knock-on effect on global statistics. With two-thirds of the world's people and five of its nine most populous countries, this region of contrasts presents a classic test case for education.

The past ten years have seen great advances in primary school enrolment, which has not only outpaced the region's population growth rate but outdistanced the rest of the world. China and Indonesia are close to achieving full primary school enrolment and have raised their literacy rates (to 83.9 and 98 per cent respectively). By doubling its education budget, Bangladesh made a quantum leap of 19 per cent in primary school enrolment and over 25 per cent in literacy (from 35 per cent to 61 per cent) in less than a decade. Population growth has decreased in Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia and Pakistan, resulting in a more effective use of public funds.



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Children walking to school in China, where school enrolment has soared as the population has decreased.

Non-formal initiatives in adult education are flourishing in the region, as is early childhood education, with a 25 per cent increase in kindergartens and nurseries. Quality is now an issue in many countries, including India, where the District Primary Education Programme has decentralized schools, increased community involvement, raised teachers' salaries and equipped classrooms. Enrolment currently stands at 71 per cent. India's Total Literacy Campaign brought a 12 per cent leap in literacy. "In a population of one billion, that represents a lot of readers!" points out Wolfgang Vollmann of the nine high-population countries initiative (E-9).

The crippling East Asian economic crisis of 1997, whose impact is still being felt, was a real setback for education. Ruth Kagia of the World Bank calls it "a wake-up call to the world that development is fragile and can be undermined if its key pillars are not fully integrated."

Can education provide a defence against future calamities? The Prime Minister of Thailand, Mr Chuan Leekpai, believes so. Citing a new law entitling every Thai citizen to twelve years of basic education, he recently affirmed that human resources were his country's "most valuable asset."

"There have been some spectacular forward steps," acknowledges Victor Ordoñez of UNESCO Bangkok. "But also problems that have not been attacked in any meaningful way."



Zoom

- ▶ Amongst the world's developing regions, East Asia and the Pacific combined are closest to achieving education for all with 97 per cent of all children in school.
- ▶ Most of the East Asian adult population can now read and write, with a 94 per cent literacy rate.
- ▶ Early childhood education, a relatively new development, has expanded rapidly. Enrolment grew from 36 million in 1990 to over 45 million in 1998, an increase of almost 25 per cent.
- ▶ Challenges remain in South Asia, where only three out of four children go to school and only 56 per cent of adults are literate.

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Hidden within "the positive rosy picture", says Ordoñez, are socio-economic inequality, gender disparities and other obstacles to education for all. The gender gap has narrowed, but not by much – barely at all in the large countries of South Asia, where poverty levels are on a par with sub-Saharan Africa. One South Asian child in four is out of school, and adult literacy stands at 56 per cent.

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Much of the Asian paradox can be traced to investment, or lack of it, in basic education. In the long run, only education can bridge the gulf between the erstwhile 'tiger' economies of east Asian countries such as Thailand and continuing low incomes in south Asian countries such as Bhutan. Perhaps the most notable example of education overcoming poverty is provided by the contrasting cases of the Republic of Korea and Pakistan. Both countries had the same per capita income in 1960, but very different primary school enrolment ratios (the Republic of Korea had 94 per cent enrolment while Pakistan had only 30 per cent). By 1996, the Republic of Korea had three times the per capita gross domestic product of Pakistan.

Another kind of Asian paradox is that military spending in the region has actually risen in the past ten years, as Kul C. Gautam, of UNICEF's Bangkok office, explains. "Since the World Conference on Education for All in 1990, military expenditures in the world fell by 30 per cent from some US\$1 trillion in 1990 to \$700 billion in 1998. But during that same period, military expenditures increased by 27 per cent from \$95 billion to \$130 billion in Asia."

Clearly, the potential of education in Asia and the Pacific is as huge as the challenges it faces. ■

A school for working children in Dhaka, Bangladesh, run by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, a non-formal education network serving around 1.2 million children.



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